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Ralph Waldo Emerson.
A Discourse, Apr. 30, 1852,
by Edw. Augustus Horton.

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on Sunday

Ralph Waldo Emerson:

*His services as minister of the Second Church, and
his qualities as a Religious Teacher.*

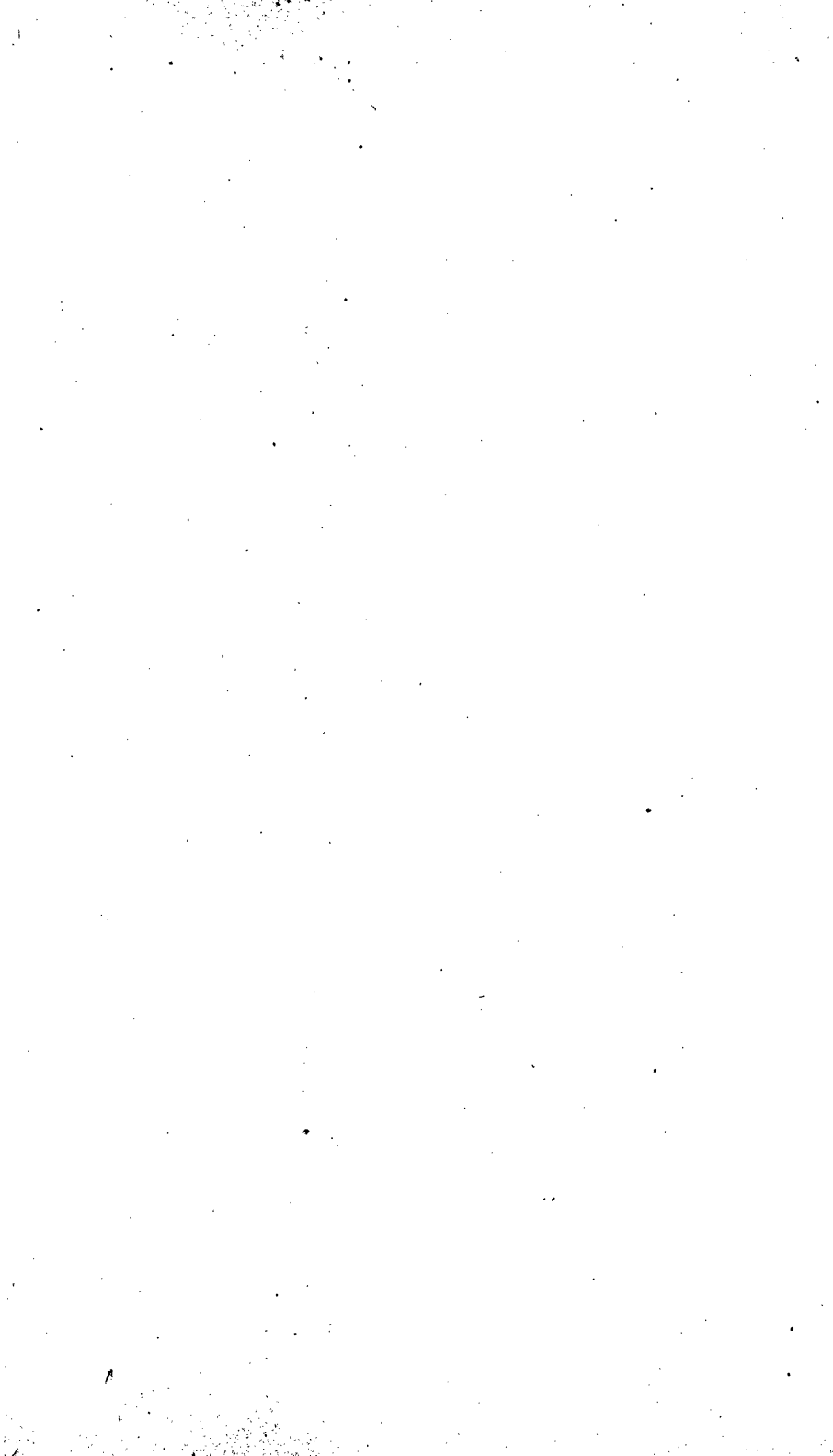
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A DISCOURSE

PREACHED IN THE SECOND CHURCH, BOSTON,
SUNDAY, APRIL 30, 1882,

BY THE MINISTER,

EDWARD AUGUSTUS HORTON.



RALPH WALDO EMERSON was born in Boston, May 25, 1803, and died at Concord, Mass., April 27, 1882. He was minister of the Second Church in Boston from March 11, 1829 until October 28, 1832, at which time he ended his first and only pastorate. Funeral services were held the day this discourse was preached, Sunday afternoon, April 30, in the Unitarian Church at Concord. A delegation from the Second Church attended, consisting of the pastor, a representation of the Parish Committee, and others. The day was pleasant, the attendance large, the services simple. This memorial sermon is printed at request of the Church, as it was delivered, without special revision for the press.



"All ye that know his name, say: How is the strong staff broken and the beautiful rod." JEREMIAH xlviii: 17.

ONE by one, in rapid succession, the shining lights of our country are extinguished. This does not necessarily mean darkness, for those leaders have communicated themselves to our life, and they still shine in the reproduced character of our laws and people. But as signal, living minds in our midst, they cease. No longer the poet sings his melodious stanzas; no longer the eminent thinker sends forth from Concord his oracles. The recent loss we have sustained in Ralph Waldo Emerson's death takes our best, our greatest American. In him we found our noblest expression, pure and simple, of a Christian Republic. He breathed the air of freedom, and proclaimed its inestimable value. Liberty of thought, of worship, of life, of taste, of aim—he glorified. Rousseau lauded the natural man, as we find him in the barbaric rudeness of the uncivilized stage; Emerson eulogized the natural man as we find him master of arts, society, and culture. But I am not venturing on this great theme without a definite reason. It is peculiarly fitting that we should devote this hour to a tribute to his memory. Ralph Waldo Emerson was once a minister of this church; his name is on the tablets that record the honored list of those who have

served the Second Church as pastors; and though his term of service was brief, though the separation involved a difference of conviction, there is no name in the list that stands higher. But another reason justifies our selection of this subject. I look upon Mr. Emerson as a preacher, throughout his life. At the close of his last sermon to this church he expressed the hope that no time and no change would deprive him of the satisfaction of pursuing and exercising the highest functions of the pulpit, even though he should no longer officiate in any church as an ordained preacher. That hope he has fulfilled. Essay, poem, lecture, conversation, whatever came from him, has been inwrought with a moral and religious texture. It is the same voice sounding on through all the years, with a sweet, persuasive accent. A voice speaking in language not always easily understood by the people, and not always interpreted alike by the scholars, but one trusted for its honesty, admired for its courageous tone, and ever prized for its stirring, rallying utterances. I call him the poet-preacher, above all that have enriched the English tongue. A greater than Jeremy Taylor in the wealth of his imagery; a more spiritual one than Channing in the vision of his soul. The more you examine the closer you will find my appellation apply. Poet-preacher. Not philosopher, not logician, not philanthropist, not poet even, in the accurate sense, not essayist, not historian. Nay; but more than these, as substance and the whole are greater than form and a part. His prose productions are beautiful, analogical and striking sermons, on the grandeur of character, the nobility of duty, the loftiness

of sincerity, the everlastingness of truth, the sources of true power, the over-soul, spiritual laws, and heroism. Preacher he is from the first days of ordination by a council to the days and through them, when a great reading-world ordained him to be their inspirer. Even in his book on England you find him preaching. He could not write in any other way. His mind was a magnet that drew only those forms of thought that embodied ethics and correspondences, and eternal laws. For this great reason the pulpits of our faith may make notable mention of his name.

Mr. Emerson was a Christian theist. In this form of faith he adhered. He recognized a God, and believed in the superior adaptation of Christianity to human needs. He subscribed to no creed; he wrote none. He criticised forms and loved the solitude of individual worship. Yet he frequently attended public worship in the Unitarian church, and never made attack on the sincere faith of any sect. Skepticism he called a withering of the soul. Belief was his food. The world was full of God. True religion consisted in looking at the good so steadily and following it as to leave the evil behind. Morals and religion were one, in his sight. Nothing was nobler in his estimate than character. To find out the laws of life and to obey them seemed to him the one thing needful. On Sunday he would have men become "children of liberty, of reason, of hope, and refresh sentiments."

I shall not be so presumptuous as to attempt any analysis of Mr. Emerson's career and rank as a thinker; nor do I wish to deal with his purely literary character. This is not the fit place. But there are

reasons why this place and this hour are eminently appropriate to consider Mr. Emerson as a religious teacher. The influence his books have had on the ministry of the liberal churches, is a fact so important, as to call for emphatic acknowledgment.

I have also a personal gratitude to express, for my earliest hopes, my budding aims, were brought under the stimulus of his strong thought. There is no author whose books I have read more constantly or thoroughly than Emerson's. How many wanderers into materialism he has brought back to enthusiasm and faith! How many flickering hopes he has fed with the new oil of courage! How like a Moses he has struck rocks of common obstacles, and the springs of idealism flowed! His exhortations to be true to one's self, to look with one's own eyes, to hear the voice within, to honor the native gift — have saved thousands from unworthy surrender.

It may be said on the other hand that he went farther than most men and women can safely go, in trusting what he called intuitions, and the personal instincts. Here is where he came in conflict with Christian customs and doctrines. He always said, "look within!" But our organized religion bids us often look without and follow the example of Christ. In one place his language is as follows: "The relations of the soul to the Divine Spirit are so pure that it is profane to seek to interpose helps. Whenever a mind is simple, and receives a divine wisdom, all things pass away — means, teachers, texts, temples fall; it lives now, and absorbs past and future into the present hour." He has recorded his admiration for the Quakers by saying that they appear to him to

come nearer to the sublime history and genius of Christ than any other of the sects. Often he bursts out into some criticism of all forms and religious usages, until the reader sees every familiar custom blown away, and nothing left. Yet this is but one side of the man, for in another place you will read these terse, impressive words: "Religion is as inexpugnable as the use of lamps, or of wells, or of chimneys. We must have days and temples and teachers. The Sunday is the core of our civilization, dedicated to thought and reverence. It invites to the noblest solitude and the noblest society, to whatever means and aids of spiritual refreshment. Men may well come together to kindle each other to virtuous living." Emerson ^x must be judged by *all* that he has uttered, not by any one part. It is unfair to test the Bible by a few texts: so this man cannot be understood by disjointed extracts.

The chief question that concerns us here at this time, in a place of worship, is this: Have the writings ^x of Emerson tended to weaken, or to strengthen religion? The answer to this will depend greatly upon the position which one occupies in the churches. Viewed from a Trinitarian standpoint, he has undermined faith, and taught heresy. Viewed from the Ritualistic ground, he has been an antagonist of ceremonies. He has been a dissenter; has invited reason to sit in judgment on sacred themes; has taught the moral law in place of theology, has doubted many doctrines consecrated by long-held respect. Emerson has been called by all kinds of bad names. In a book that lies before me as I write, he is accused of denying immortality; yet he affirms it in his noble essay on

that subject. He is called a pantheist; yet he proclaims the independence of will and the blessings of courage. He is said to teach that there is no distinction between right and wrong; yet his writings are crowded with ethical maxims. It has been declared that he took away all foundations for humanity to rest on; yet he gave his life to strengthening the permanent convictions of our race. The time is coming when those who unduly laud, and those who unduly depreciate Emerson, will correct their mistakes. He has his place. Time will reveal it. He came to build. In a time washed and unsettled by currents of transition, his aim was to hold fast certain central truths. His work was not done by profound genius. He had a clear, steady eye. He looked and reported; read human nature; comprehended facts; appreciated the spirit behind the letter. Child of the new continent, he cast off fetters, threw aside trammels, and in serene self-possession taught the truths that come home to mankind in all ages.

But to return: Has he weakened or strengthened religion? I should reply that, in essential and permanent ways, Emerson spoke for the everlasting religion of spirit and truth. In his own way he did it. Not the way you and I could do, or might wish to do. I refer to the main drift and result of his writings. That phrase, "sweetness and light," applies to him. The power of his instruction runs into many moulds. I am not concerned with the facts that he did not like this form or that belief, or some usage. We must go deeper. If some passages shock us, or others mystify us, the best solution is to go to the heart of his thought. There you find reverence, purity, morality,

high aim, unselfishness, love, candor, truthfulness, worship, Godlikeness. Will the churches throw him out? Then, like Abraham Lincoln, he goes a path along which many others will gladly go.

A story comes to us which I should not quote did it not emanate from an orthodox evangelical source. Father Taylor, the wonderful Methodist preacher, you will remember, was a warm friend of Mr. Emerson. He heard that some overzealous divines were predicting that Emerson would be lost; would be sent to perdition for his teachings. Whereupon Father Taylor said that emigration would surely tend that way if so good a man as his friend were sent below. I do not pretend myself to belong to the transcendental school, of which Emerson was so conspicuous a member. And it is self-evident that if I were a disciple of his and went as far in all my conclusions, I could not consent, honestly, to preach in a Christian pulpit; but it is not a question now, by the open grave, of metaphysics, of speculation, of intricate theories, held or not held. The battles of Norton and Ripley have died away. The essay at Harvard to the divinity students, which made the professors shake their heads with dismay, is now regarded with composure. We look at the man and weigh the total animus of his career.

So it was with Darwin, so recently buried in Westminster Abbey, with every honor. You and I may not accept his theory of evolution to the extreme he carried it, and yet we may admire his faultless character, praise the spirit of his scholarship, and be thankful for those remarkable results which have followed from Mr. Darwin's patient, fearless, and deep researches.

I, for one, bring my garland of gratitude to Mr. Emerson, here in this Christian pulpit. No fear that I may be misunderstood shall intimidate me. We all owe a large debt to him. His pure, manly, beautiful example has imparted that to our century in the New World, which most honors and dignifies our history.

The connection of Mr. Emerson with this society as minister, and the history of his withdrawal, are matters which deserve a special though brief consideration.

This church was gathered in 1650, the second religious church and society in Boston. The First Church, now under the charge of Rev. Rufus Ellis, was organized in 1630. The ministers of this church up to the time of Mr. Emerson's induction, had been John Mayo, Increase Mather, Cotton Mather, Joshua Gee, Samuel Mather, Samuel Checkley, Jr., John Lathrop, and Henry Ware, Jr. The house of worship was then, in Mr. Ware's time, on Hanover Street, the finest part of the city at that period. Mr. Ware had been settled in 1817, and after twelve years of service found his health giving way. A colleague was sought. Mr. Emerson, then a student of theology, was selected, and with the full approbation of all was installed on the 11th of March, 1829. Mr. Ware went to Europe, and returning in a year, resigned; so that the new pastor bore the full responsibilities of the ministerial office. In a little more than three years, this service ended. Mr. Emerson resigned in 1832, and Chandler Robbins became his successor one year afterward, in 1833. There are those listening to me this morning who were in the society at that time. They will bear added testimony to the records of those days, that Mr.

Emerson endeared himself to all. Strong ties were created; personal affection existed; and regrets at the separation were intensified by true respect each for each. Never was a difference of opinion more calmly and graciously held on both sides.

The key to the transaction was this: Mr. Emerson gradually grew into a conviction that the Lord's Supper was not a help to him, as usually administered. He desired to have the emblems set aside; bread and wine to him were material and not spiritual. He met the church members at his house and proposed a new form, to be without authority and without the elements: a simple commemorative assembling, unmarked by the usual features. A committee was appointed and reported the following resolutions, which were unanimously adopted:

1. That in the opinion of this church, after a careful consideration of the subject, it is expedient to maintain the celebration of the Lord's Supper in the present form.
2. That the brethren of this church retain an undiminished regard for the pastor, and entertain the hope that he will find it consistent with his sense of duty to continue the customary administration of the Supper.

Shortly after, Mr. Emerson preached a sermon fully showing his position, presenting arguments, affirming his conscientious scruples, and tendering his resignation; all in the gentlest, noblest spirit. With this terminated his career as a public and ordained minister.

This scene, so amicable, so full of Christian courtesy, stands out in strong contrast to some of the more recent separations between ministers and people, involving points of belief. Here was mutual respect

and consideration ; but we behold, in our day, prosperous churches rent and devastated by the anger, the insincerity, and the bigotry of men, who, while clamoring for freedom for themselves, will not grant it to others. Who can but deeply honor Mr. Emerson for this one act, in that he treated this old historic church with becoming gravity, and went his way with the hearty good-will of all. Such an act fills out and illustrates his teachings.

In his essay on character, he says: "I have read somewhere that men were wont to say of Lord Chatham there was something finer in the man than anything which he said." Emerson was always greater than his utterances.

You will pardon a personal incident as bearing on this event. Two summers ago I preached in Concord, and there in the congregation sat the man of whom I speak—a reverent worshiper with the rest. In the afternoon I called upon him, taking the liberty by virtue of my being a successor here to his labors in this church. Although memory was failing, he recalled many facts and persons connected with our society, and evidenced an affection for this people, and a tender remembrance of the past. But I specially recall the quiet, musing manner in which he spoke of this difference of views. It was brief—only this: "I had hoped to carry them with me; but I failed." Said with absolute composure and sunniness. Spoken as one would refer to some honest effort, fraternally made with others who as honestly declined.

It may interest you to hear a portion of the letter which Mr. Emerson addressed to the parish, after he had preached his sermon of farewell, not simply for

its relation to this subject, but to give us insight into his mind and style and spirit at that time. He speaks of the state of his health as requiring a sea-voyage, and desires to address to his Christian friends a parting word. He owns that he has not fulfilled all the hopes he had entertained, by reason of domestic affliction and personal infirmities. "Yet," he continues, "our faith in the great truths of the New Testament makes the change of places and circumstances of less account to us by fixing our attention upon that which is unalterable. . . . I am no longer your minister, but am not the less engaged, I hope, to the love and service of the same eternal cause, the advancement, namely, of the kingdom of God in the hearts of men. . . . To me, as one disciple, is the ministry of truth, as far as I can discern and declare it, committed; and I desire to live nowhere and no longer than that grace of God is imparted to me — the liberty to seek and the liberty to utter it. . . . This separation does not make any real change in our spiritual relation to each other. . . . If we have conspired from week to week in the sympathy and expression of devout sentiments; if we have received together the unspeakable gift of God's truth; if we have studied together the sense of any divine word, or striven together in any charity, or conferred together for the relief or instruction of any brother; if together we have laid down the dead in a pious hope, or held up the babe into the baptism of Christianity; above all, if we have shared in any habitual acknowledgment of that benignant God, whose omnipresence raises and glorifies the meanest offices and the lowest ability, and opens heaven in every heart that worships him —

then indeed are we united; we are mutually debtors to each other of faith and hope, engaged to persist and confirm each other's hearts in obedience to the gospel."

There are many other personal tokens of esteem in the letter. He closes by wishing the families of his former charge every genuine blessing, and in the faith and hope of a resurrection planted in the constitution of the human soul, and confirmed and manifested by Jesus Christ, he bids them farewell. The sermon wherein his views were set forth on the communion, had for a text the words: "The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." It contains passages which I should be glad to quote in justice to its author, but sufficient space is not at my command. Probably no stronger or more well-balanced plea from that side, has been put forth. But it failed to convince his hearers, since they could not accept many of the premises from which he argued.

I may say incidentally, while disclaiming all intention of discussing the subject here and now, that the same scruples exist quite widely at the present time which troubled Mr. Emerson. The form of the communion service hinders some from participating. The bread and wine and ceremony seem unspiritual. To remedy this some suggest putting the emblems in sight, but not employing them. Look at them, but use them not. The criticism on this procedure is, that whether a good method or not, it is not the method of Jesus; and we are supposed to perpetuate a custom. Again, there is no commemorative service I know of which does not embody itself in material

form. Hospitality is expressed, the world over, by eating bread and salt at a host's table; when one spiritualizes a custom too far, it evaporates into a ghost and is lost. Symbols are divine media, history through. It seems to me more rational and more respectful to put the service away entirely rather than change it into something it never was or never was intended to be.

Mr. Emerson preached once in the Second Church pulpit after his return from Europe, giving a discourse at the funeral of Mr. George Sampson, an honored merchant of Boston, a member of this church, and exceedingly intimate with our subject. He received a call to New Bedford, having preached there several Sundays, but declined. As a preacher, Mr. Emerson impressed by his earnest yet benign spirit. On the day that Henry Ware gave his farewell address to this church, full of tenderness, Mr. Emerson preached from the text: "What is a man profited if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" One who heard him says his manner was solemn, and earnest thought pervaded the discourse. The idea was that each man must be saved by his own inward redeemer. If knowledge led not to action, it passed away. During this pastorate of three years, Mr. Emerson was on the school committee of Boston, served as chaplain of the State Senate, and preached one of the charity sermons. In various years succeeding he has written hymns for the marked occasions, or anniversaries of this church. To show you how strong the underlying ties continued between this church and Mr. Emerson, let me quote the beautiful stanzas he wrote for the ordination of Chandler Robbins, who was his successor:

We love the venerable house
 Our fathers built to God;
 In heaven are kept their grateful vows,
 Their dust endears the sod.

Here holy thoughts a light have shed
 From many a radiant face,
 And prayers of tender hope have spread
 A perfume through the place.

And anxious hearts have pondered here
 The mystery of life,
 And prayed the Eternal Spirit clear
 Their doubts and aid their strife.

From humble tenements around
 Came up the pensive train,
 And in the church a blessing found,
 Which filled their homes again.

They live with God, their homes are dust;
 But here their children pray,
 And in this fleeting life-time, trust
 To find the narrow way.

To sum up the whole history of the connection of Mr. Emerson with this church we may clearly see that though the public at large may have said bitter things of Mr. Emerson in 1832 the people of this church, the ones most involved, respected him, understood him, cherished him. I have already quoted one of Father Taylor's strong remarks; there is another on record, put there by Mrs. Horace Mann in a letter. She says that some called Mr. Emerson insane; many maligned him; but Father Taylor told some critics that Mr. Emerson might think this or that, but he was more like Jesus Christ than any one he had ever known. He had seen him when his religion was tested, and it bore the test.

The Second Church may well feel proud of its relations to one who could so impress differing minds with the nobility of his motives.

Various efforts have been made to classify Emerson, but he holds an original place. He has been called an optimist; and that he was, believing in the tendency of all things upward, believing in a law of progress. He has been called a transcendentalist; which is partly applicable: he believed in a transcendent source of supply of truth and inspiration above experience, open to every one. He has been regarded a mystic; which is partly true: he believed in the union of man and God, as the stream runs to meet the ocean. He is ranked as an idealist; which is also correct: his ground of belief is always a spiritual world of which we and all things are but the manifestations. He is called a seer, by reason of his far-reaching sight into phenomena; and this is right. Like Swedenborg, he believed in correspondences and analogies and degrees.

These designations mark parts of the man. But after all he does not belong to any philosophic class. He was an active, practical force; and will continue to be. I cannot find a better title for the whole man than the one I started with, one which my long study of his books most favors. He was a preacher; not in the sense of gown and desk and ritual; but in the greater and historic sense, from the times of the prophets, through Christ and his Apostles, who had no pulpits or churches, down to the voices of reformers and saints in the streets of modern civilization. If the true object of a sermon is to communicate life, Emerson's essays are sermons. If true preaching aims at rousing men and women to unquailing faith in the attainment of goodness and to the practice of righteousness, then our subject preaches vividly. If

the best work done for religion by the pulpit is to so present ideal virtues that humanity shall long to incarnate them in character, then Emerson has outstripped us all.

After all, we may ask, In what special respect are we justified in claiming that Emerson spoke throughout his life, for true religion? It was necessary at the beginning of this century, that a reform should be made in behalf of man, the present, *this* world, duty, morals, reality. It was a protest against hollow conventionalism; against the idle and fanciful views which sapped action, enervated character, and gave to superstition what reason and common sense alone should claim. "God in the human soul;" that was the watchword of two great minds whose splendor delighted the English world. Carlyle across the ocean, and Emerson here, set forth to preach the gospel of duty. They were preachers with a pulpit in every village and city.

Carlyle did a great deal for young men and women; but Emerson has done more. He was more open-minded; he loved the common people; he read life closer and better. Both sought to make men listen to God in the soul; to trust instincts and intuitions; to listen to conscience; to believe in the dignity of human nature; but they came to different results.

Carlyle ceased to have much influence some years ago, but Emerson's books were never read so much as now, and they are destined to a larger fame. Carlyle came at last to scorn science; Emerson welcomes it: Carlyle was irritated by modern habits; Emerson adapts himself to them: Carlyle denounced the new theories of thought; Emerson saw in them evidences

of earnest labors: Carlyle dreaded to grow old; Emerson wore his years gracefully. The difference is summed up in this: One expended his whole store of faith in human nature and the world's progress, for it was not large; the other drew from a reserved, exhaustless supply.

What I claim for Emerson is, that he has been more consistent and true to his original views of life. He has been gentle, wise, inclusive. He has stretched out his thought to cover a universe of facts and laws. His teachings apply everywhere, to all classes of people, to all experiences. He disdains nothing; scorns no one; recognizes God's image in every mortal; uses the language of Jesus, and speaks of a Power above, that is love and wisdom. It was Emerson who introduced Carlyle to this country, as Carlyle had introduced Goëthe to England. All three were teaching the same truth of the reality of life, the nearness of God, the beauty and grandeur of Duty. They all drew the attention of the world away from the future life where it had been too long concentrated, and showed men the divine side of our present existence.

You may ask, If there is so much of God in the human soul concerning which these men so amply taught, why do we need Christianity? Christ also reveals what is in the soul. His name is Immanuel, *God with us*. High above these teachers He stands, proclaiming the deeper truths of self-sacrifice and immortality. Christ does not exclude all that nature and the soul bring, but uses it, builds it up into character. How many in this world can trust themselves utterly? Are we not all ignorant, frail, liable to sin

and error? The voice within is often muffled; it misleads: the truths of Christianity are standards and tests. Christ becomes example. His system of belief is one that unites all scattered truths. He revealed our hope, our possibilities, and became the Way, the Truth and the Life unto that heavenly life which forever manifests God in the soul.

And now, as I desire to close my thought, how inadequate appear usual words and praise. The silence of the organ best chants the master's death. The fact that Emerson lives no longer is the most moving of all things to be said. But the treasures of his published wisdom abide. From them youth shall draw supplies of inspiration. Because of his words, nobler citizens shall appear, and the churches learn a holier law of catholicity. Like Longfellow, whose grave is still unturfed, he was in himself all and more than he taught. "He was incapable of bitterness; and in this doth his greatness most appear, that, having defamers, he heeded them not; persecuted by enemies, he hated them not; reviled by inferiors, he retorted not." Sifted by time's unfailing tests, the errors of his utterance shall be winnowed away, and the truth he faithfully sought to tell his fellow-men, shall be preserved. None more grateful for this discrimination than he. Napoleon said: "My courage consists in this, that my hand is immediately connected with my head." Emerson adds: "but the *sacred* courage is connected with the heart." It was this large recognition of thought and emotion, never so strong each as when united, that gave our subject's ideas their Christian fervor and power. No intellect, however kingly, dazzled his piercing eye.

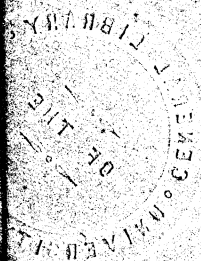
A giant brain won no admiration from him unless it was humble with the love of God and man. The innocent murmur of children's tongues confessing endearment was sweeter music in his ear than the proud strains of conquering tyranny.

The strong staff of his golden speech is broken; the beautiful rod of his earthly life lies shattered. Yet mourning seems an insult to his tranquil, God-loving, and heaven-seeking spirit. We cannot make him dead. This afternoon they will bear the mortal part, so good a servant of the immortal, to the lovely spot where Hawthorne, Thoreau, and others of his cherished friends are buried. The living will return to their duties; but life will be more worth the living because Emerson has had his home in New England, and illuminated state and church, home and business, time and eternity, with matchless teachings. Farewell, noble spirit! But thou wilt return. Whenever freedom craves courage to strike a blow for human rights, she will turn to thee! Wherever men seek strong watchwords to rally will and conquer fear, there thy presence will be felt! To those who long for the beautiful and the good, thy inspiring thoughts shall come as guides!



Edward A. Ho

Ralph Waldo Emerson



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